

issue brief

preventing violence in the homes of military families

military families in crisis

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF), have demanded unprecedented service at every level of the U.S. Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marines. For the first time in our military history, active duty, reservists, and guard servicemen and women have been required to complete multiple deployments.

These repeated, lengthy deployments combined with limited family “dwell” time in between have deteriorated the stability of many military families. Of the almost two million Americans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, many arrive home with serious mental health conditions and injuries that increase relationship stress, marital strain, and family violence.

The first large-scale, nongovernmental assessment of the psychological needs of OIF/OEF service members, released by the Rand Corporation in 2008, revealed that 38 percent of these combat veterans suffered from Post Traumatic Stress (PTS), major depression, traumatic brain injury, or some combination of the three – yet less than half had sought treatment. Figures from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) suggest that these numbers have almost doubled; Forty-four percent of those who came to the VA for help have been diagnosed with one or more mental health issue.



Male veterans with post traumatic stress are two to three times more likely to engage in intimate partner violence.



This psychological and emotional toll on our veterans has put them at greater risk of perpetrating family violence. Research has found that:

- Male veterans with PTS are two to three times more likely to engage in intimate partner violence, compared to those without PTS — up to six times higher than the general civilian population.
- 81% of veterans suffering from depression and PTS have engaged in at least one violent act against their partner in the past year.
- Over half of veterans with PTS performed one severe act of violence in the past year — more than 14 times higher than the general civilian population.

However, the confluence of domestic violence, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), PTS, and other mental health injuries among war veterans is by no means fully understood at this point, and requires greater analysis and investigation.

lack of infrastructure to support military families

By the time the wars reached their apex in 2009, two million military personnel had already served in Iraq and Afghanistan, and 180,000 troops were still deployed in both regions. While military families were already vulnerable to conditions that could lead to higher rates of family violence, the systems and services designed to assist our OIF/OEF veterans at the time were unprepared to meet their additional needs. Few providers within the VA were trained in assessment and treatment of combat-related emotional trauma, and VA clinics were often inaccessible to veterans living in rural areas. In addition, a newly inaugurated president had yet to establish a policy agenda to address any of these issues, and very few funders were engaged in this work. At the same time, the number of nonprofit military support organizations was on the rise, yet there was no way to determine which ones were effective.

our response

Blue Shield of California Foundation's mission includes a longstanding commitment to ending domestic violence, and we remain the largest private funder of domestic violence (DV) services and prevention in the state of California. As part of our work to strengthen the state's DV safety net, the Foundation supports innovative prevention solutions and improved access to services, especially for the most vulnerable and underserved populations.

The challenge of caring for our returning OIF/IEF veterans and their families was a national issue, but it was one that was especially acute in California, which saw more of its young men and women killed or injured in battle than any other state.

Given our Foundation's commitment to addressing domestic violence and the crisis facing military families in California, we were compelled to take action. And while we wanted to be part of the solution, we also recognized the need to better understand the complex set of issues and circumstance affecting military families before we could begin to influence change.

So we did our homework. We talked to experts. We looked at data. We assessed what capacities already existed and where more help was needed. Through that period of discovery, it became clear that the Foundation and a few strategic partners could help close some of the most important knowledge and service gaps, especially in California.

In 2009, the Foundation officially launched an initiative to prevent violence in the homes of military families. Our approach has been to educate and encourage those who work with returning military personnel to include family violence risk-assessment and prevention activities in their practice.

What follows is a summary of the Foundation's investments in documenting, understanding, and preventing domestic violence among military families.



what we've done

total amount granted: **\$2.28 million**

research prevention policy & advocacy partnerships

conducting research to understand the problem

insight

There was limited up-to-date research on the prevalence of domestic violence in military families or accurate information on the correlation between combat-related trauma and intimate partner abuse.

impact

There is now documentation and research into veteran mental health (including post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety) and the corresponding rates of psychological and physical aggression toward partners.

sample investments

- Blue Star Families — To conduct a Military Life Issues Survey that examined the relationships between military veterans and their spouses or partners.
- San Jose State University — To document the prevalence of DV among returning combat veterans and their partners on college campuses.
- NCIRE Veteran's Health Research Institute — To understand the prevalence and predictors of DV among returning veterans, and determine the best ways to help veterans seek the treatment they need.

investing in practical ways to prevent future violence

insight

There was a dearth of evidence-based and scalable methods to effectively mitigate domestic violence among over-stressed military families.

impact

We've piloted two effective evidence-based models and developed an online repository of resources to support healthy reintegration of combat veterans with their families. These models are being scaled and shared with policymakers at the national level.

sample investments

- National Center on Family Homelessness — To design and test Community Circles' Strength At Home, a new community-based model for preventing violence among military families in California's Central Valley.
- San Jose State University — To design and test a DV prevention model for veterans and their partners on college campuses, and to develop a tool kit that enables the program to be easily replicated across California State University and community college systems.
- Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America Foundation, Inc. — To incorporate new family violence prevention resources and tools into Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America Foundation's (IAVA) web sites.

putting the issue on the policy agenda

insight

There were few policy solutions to address domestic violence among returning veteran populations and limited momentum from policy institutions to prioritize the issue.

impact

Today, domestic violence is one of the issues policymakers consider when developing legislation to support service members and their families. Philanthropic organizations and their networks are helping to generate momentum for this policy shift.

sample investments

- The Aspen Institute, Inc. — To convene an Aspen Institute summit on military family well-being and provide DV training resources to mental-health service providers, as well as to Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense staff.
- Blue Star Families — To support a national public service announcement campaign to promote wellness and prevent violence in military families, and to convene two “America Joins Forces with Military Families” conferences to elevate the critical needs of this population.
- Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America Foundation, Inc. — To integrate family violence prevention into advocacy efforts on behalf of military families.

creating partnerships and awareness

insight

Few community-based organizations had military cultural competence. And few military service organizations had been previously aware that veterans managing mental health issues might be at risk for domestic violence and need help from civilian organizations. Philanthropy wasn’t effectively engaged.

impact

Police officers, domestic violence service providers, and mental health clinicians in a dozen California counties are now routinely given veteran cultural competency training. Military service providers are also integrating tools for domestic violence prevention into their family support resources. Private funders are increasingly engaging to support military families.

sample investments

- Alternatives to Domestic Violence — To evaluate the Military Families Initiative, a community-based family violence prevention program, in partnership with March Air Reserve Base.
- San Diego Grantmakers — To support development of a model military family working group that integrates family violence prevention, and to share the model with other communities.
- Council on Foundations and San Diego Grantmakers — To strengthen philanthropy’s capacity to address violence among military families through two new funder groups: a national Military Families Community of Practice and a San Diego Military Family Support Working Group.
- Swords to Plowshares — To train first responders – especially police, DV advocates, and military service providers across California – about family violence in the veteran community, with the goal of preventing family violence.



Two million OIF/OEF veterans have now returned home for good and will require continued support as they reintegrate into life with their families and communities.

the work yet to be done

Much has changed since we began supporting the study and prevention of violence among military families. Today, U.S. troops have been withdrawn from Iraq and are dramatically reduced in Afghanistan. Most Americans are at least aware of post-deployment mental health issues and policy changes at the federal level are helping to remove some of the barriers to care and improve access to mental health services and other benefits.

And yet much work remains to be done. While service members are no longer faced with the rapid deployment cycle present during the years that spanned this funding cycle, the reality is that some two million OIF/OEF veterans have now returned home for good and will require continued support as they reintegrate into life with their families and communities.

maximize your impact

Blue Shield of California Foundation is dedicated to sharing the lessons learned from our grantmaking efforts. It is promising that private funding for this at-risk population has increased since the time of our initial investments. Still, existing funding streams remain scattershot. Based on our five years of experience working on the issue of violence in the homes of military families, we have identified the following most-pressing opportunities for impact:

- Learn about military and veteran issues in your community. Determine the demographic characteristics and issues facing service members and their families in your region, as well as the factors that impede and facilitate service provision. Establishing strong relationships with key military and veteran stakeholders is key to identifying the greatest areas of need.

- Improve community infrastructure designed to support and respond to the needs of veterans and their families. While many communities have organizations that focus on serving the needs of targeted populations, ranging from at-risk youth to low-income families, there is a lack of focus on models of care specifically for veterans and their families. To successfully strengthen support systems, there is great value in working directly with military families in addition to the veterans themselves.
- Develop a strategy that incorporates veteran support into your existing priorities. Supporting military families does not require a completely separate approach. Instead, you can incorporate it into the work you are already doing—whether you are a funder, policymaker, or a direct service organization.
- Encourage coordination between veteran service organizations. Many veteran service organizations invest a great deal of time applying for small grants from multiple funding sources. Private sector funders and community advocates should coordinate and share information to better facilitate resource provision for organizations with successful service models.
- Focus on resources for developing OIF/OEF cultural competence. Many well-established military service organizations have a proven track record of working with past generations of veterans, but are not equipped to meet the unique needs of OIF/OEF veterans and their families. Funders should seek to invest in infrastructure development for newer organizations that demonstrate OIF/OEF cultural competence. Similarly, investing in well-established organizations may require specific resources for developing cultural competence around the unique needs of the OIF/OEF veteran population.

There is great opportunity for every foundation, funder, and individual to identify ways to support military families while advancing their existing organizational missions and priorities. By identifying the right entry point, we collectively have the capacity to ensure that service members, who have sacrificed so much to protect our country, won't have to make any more sacrifices now that they have returned home from war.

our partners

Progress on this issue in recent years is a credit to the passion, expertise, and diligence of our grant partners:

Alternatives to Domestic Violence

The Aspen Institute, Inc.

Blue Star Families

Council on Foundations and San Diego Grantmakers

Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America Foundation (IAVA)

National Center on Family Homelessness

NCIRE Veterans Health Research Institute

San Jose State University

Swords to Plowshares

U.S. Department of Defense

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

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